



# Universal School Meals PA

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Kids, Parents, Child Advocates Push for No-cost School Lunches**

***Dozens of nutrition and education representatives, along with kids and parents, want the state to expand its existing no-cost school breakfast program for K-12 students to include lunch, too.***

**HARRISBURG (May 8, 2024)** – Pennsylvania currently provides no-cost school breakfast to all K-12 students. But when it comes to lunch, many students are left to fend for themselves.

Dozens of representatives from anti-hunger groups, child nutrition programs, school leadership organizations, childhood health and education groups, along with kids and their parents, rallied in Harrisburg today to ask why the state provides one meal but not the other.

**“I wish every student in every school was able to eat a healthy meal at every meal,”** said Ryan Sundberg, a second grader at Chadds Ford Elementary in the Unionville-Chadds Ford School District. Her sister, Chase, a kindergartener in the same district, joined her at the Capitol.

The group is calling attention to the importance of ensuring equal access to nutritious meals for all students and urging lawmakers and the administration to include funding in the 2024-25 state budget to expand no-cost school breakfast to include lunch.

The families and advocates were joined by state Rep. Emily Kinkead (D-Allegheny) and state Sen. Lindsey M. Williams (D-Allegheny), who have introduced the [“No Student Should Go Hungry Universal School Meals”](#) legislation in the House ([H.B. 2829](#)) and Senate ([S.B. 1327](#)).

**“Hungry kids can’t learn,”** said Nicole Melia, food service supervisor of the Great Valley School District in Malvern, Chester County, and the public policy and legislative chair for the School Nutrition Association of PA (SNAPA). **“School meals are as essential to education as technology, transportation, and textbooks.”**

School meals reduce childhood hunger; decrease childhood weight issues and obesity; improve child nutrition and wellness; enhance child development and school readiness; support learning, attendance, and behavior; and contribute to positive mental health outcomes.

That’s why the initiative has universal support. [According to statewide polling](#), eight in 10 voters support expanding no-cost school breakfast to include lunch in K-12. Pennsylvanians of all ages and political persuasions, in all parts of the state, want to connect kids to healthy foods so they can grow and thrive.

The existing policy for school lunches, where some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame for those students who rely on school meals for their basic needs, and a barrier for those students who are not eligible but still experience food insecurity.

**“Nutritious meals fuel student learning and well-being. All students deserve equal access to both quality education and delicious, healthy food,”** said Dani Ruhf, founder and CEO of Child Hunger Outreach Partners (CHOP Out Hunger), which helps to stock food pantries in schools and pack backpacks for kids to take home.

One of eight kids goes hungry every day in Pennsylvania. In rural areas, as many as one in five kids experience hunger. School meals for all can help.

**“School meals go beyond mere sustenance; it’s fundamental to addressing societal inequities,”** Share Food Program Executive Director George Matysik said. **“For many children, these meals aren’t just about filling their stomachs; they’re about filling the gap in opportunities, no matter where you live or where you go to school.”**

School meals also are an investment in the economy. Expanding no-cost breakfast to include lunch would support local farmers by enabling them to provide more food to schools and local communities, while giving students greater access to fresh, local food.

**“We are passionate about the PA Beef to PA Schools program that is truly making a difference for the schools, for the students, and for the ag community. We appreciate the partnership and passion to fuel young minds with quality protein,”** said Nichole Hockenberry, PA Beef Council, Executive Director. **“Our desire is to provide quality nutrition fighting food insecurity all the while growing the next generation of beef consumers.”**

To drill home that point, prior to the news conference, the students, parents, and advocates hosted a legislative lunch-and-learn. The food items — fresh fruit, a fresh veggie cup with hummus, a beef stick, a cheese stick, pretzels, and milk — represented actual components served during school lunch, with locally sourced products.

Other states already recognize the value that universal school meals offer in terms of student health and learning. California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Maine, New Mexico, and Vermont all offer universal school meals. Several other states have measures pending now to expand breakfast programs to include lunch.

For more information, visit [www.universalschoolmealspa.com](http://www.universalschoolmealspa.com).

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